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2013-08-01

Prozorov , S 2013 , ' Living Ideas and Dead Bodies : The Biopolitics of Stalinism ' ,
Alternatives , vol. 38 , no. 3 , pp. 208-227 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375413497844>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/233435>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375413497844>

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Sergei Prozorov

Living Ideas and Dead Bodies: The Biopolitics of Stalinism

Abstract

The experience of Soviet socialism does not figure prominently in the studies of biopolitics. This omission is surprising given the focus on these studies on such extreme manifestations of the power over life as mass terror and concentration camps. Yet, aside from casual references to Soviet biopolitics in the work of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito, the theoretical literature on biopolitics has largely ignored the Soviet experience, while the empirical research in Russian Studies has rarely addressed the problematic of biopolitics. The article will present the experience of Stalinism as a particularly important case for the study of biopolitics, since it helps resolve the problem that has preoccupied scholars from Foucault onwards: the proximity of biopolitics to its opposite, whereby it collapses into the thanato-politics of the mass production of death. How is it that a mode of power that presents itself in terms of care, augmentation and intensification of life so frequently end up negating life itself? The paper will address this question in the context of the confluence of two political rationalities in the project of Soviet socialism, the revolutionary transcendence of the old order and the biopolitical immanentism of the construction of new forms of life. Focusing on the catastrophic policies of the Great Break (1928-1932), we shall argue that this combination is ultimately aporetic, leading to the violent destruction of the very lives that were to be transformed. We conclude with a discussion of the contemporary relevance of the lessons from Stalinist biopolitics.

Keywords: biopolitics, Stalinism, socialism, governmentality, revolution, violence

Introduction

The application of the Foucauldian theory of biopolitics to the 20th century experience of totalitarianism has been curiously one-sided. Foucault's original thesis about the historical shift from the negative and repressive power of the sovereign towards the positive and productive power over life has been ceaselessly addressed, restated and corrected in the context of European fascism and particularly German Nazism.¹ However, aside from casual references to Soviet socialism in the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, the theoretical literature on biopolitics has largely ignored the experience of Stalinist totalitarianism,² while the empirical research on this period in Soviet and Russian Studies has, with very few exceptions, ignored the problematic of biopolitics.³ This omission illustrates a wider lack of interest in the phenomenon of Stalinism in contemporary philosophy and political theory, which either subsume it along with Nazism under the vague rubric of totalitarianism or dismiss it as a modern version of traditional Russian despotism that is of little philosophical interest.⁴ In Western philosophy Stalinism has not been subjected to the same kind of critique that, from the Frankfurt School onwards, focused on Nazism as the obscene underside of Western modernity.⁵ No such critique has been attempted in the Russian academic discourse either, which focused either on setting straight the historical record of Stalinist terror or participated in the ideological polemic that characterized the destalinization of the Perestroika and the early 1990s. Thus, despite the immensely rich historical research produced since the early 1990s, the phenomenon of Stalinism appears under-theorized and disconnected from the contemporary debates in political and social theory.⁶

Particularly in the case of biopolitics, this disconnection is strongly detrimental since the case of Stalinism provides an abundance of empirical examples of the exercise of power over life that clearly resonate with problem-space of biopolitics originally charted by Foucault. The post-revolutionary project of the 'construction of socialism' offers us a myriad of examples of radical transformation of every possible aspect of human existence (hygiene, sexuality, friendship, legality, dancing, diet, work, etc.), whereby Soviet authorities did not merely restrict or repress forms of life but sought to direct, mould and reconstruct them along the lines prescribed by or at least consistent with the Marxist-Leninist ideology. While the content of this ideology arguably sets the Soviet case apart from the more familiar focus of the studies of biopolitics on Western Europe and North America, the drive for the positive

reconstitution of forms of life clearly exemplifies the biopolitical turn in governmentality.⁷

Even more importantly, the experience of Stalinism helps us address what increasingly appears to be the central problem, if not an aporia, of the theory of biopolitics, namely the relation between its positive and negative aspects, the power of life valorized by Negri and the power of death accursed by Agamben.

Is biopolitics positive or negative, productive or destructive? If liberal biopolitics is the former and Nazi biopolitics is the latter, what accounts for this difference? Is the thanatopolitical conversion of biopolitics due to biological racism (so that Nazism becomes thinkable as the negation of the positive-biopolitical tradition of the West) or is it rather a necessary supplement of biopolitics that from the outset constitutes its object (bare life) as permanently exposed to death? Is the recourse of liberal biopolitics to the negation of life an indicator of its hidden proximity to its 'totalitarian' antagonist or is the violence of liberal biopolitics owing to its own immanent paradoxes? Is a wholly positive biopolitics devoid of

any destruction of life at all possible? These and other questions would certainly benefit from the consideration of the case of Stalinism, in which the problem of positivity and negativity in politics, of bio- and thanatopolitics, arguably reaches its most extreme point. As a project of positive transformation of all social life along the lines of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, Stalinism exemplifies the biopolitical presupposition about the amenability of the biological existence of populations to transformation in governmental practices. The well-known slogans about the constitution of the 'New Soviet Man' and the 'Soviet people' as a new 'historical community of human beings' clearly indicate the positive, literally constructive character of the Soviet biopolitical project. At the same time, the actual experience of the construction of socialism, from the terrorist drive of the collectivization to the anti-Semitic purge initiated by the Doctor's Plot of 1953 and only interrupted by Stalin's death, has been remarkably destructive, annihilating the very lives that were to be transformed into something new. Stalinism thus appears to be a case of an extremely productive biopolitics that turned into an equally extreme thanatopolitics. It is precisely its extreme and paroxysmal character that makes the case of Stalinism indispensable for understanding the potentiality for violence immanent to all biopolitics as well as the limits that restrain this potentiality within various constellations of biopolitical government.

In this article we shall take the first step towards this understanding by analyzing Stalinist biopolitics as a distinct mode of political problematization of life. Our approach to the concept of biopolitics is simultaneously more general and more specific than the focus on the empirical techniques of the government of bodies and populations, which is increasingly prevalent in the Foucault-inspired histories of Stalinism.⁸ Empirical studies of socialist rationalities of government in such spheres as sexuality and reproduction, hygiene and

public health, labour and crime have tended to subsume the Soviet experience under Western biopolitics as a particular case of the more general paradigm of modern state interventionism alongside such other late-modernizing countries as Turkey, Iran or Mexico.⁹ In contrast, the evident differences between the Stalinist USSR and other modern states, either democratic or authoritarian, are explained with reference to the communist ideology, in which biopolitical techniques were embedded and acquired additional meanings or functions.

There is thus a division of labour between ideology, which accounts for the heterogeneity of the Soviet Union and other modern states, and biopolitical techniques, which testify to their underlying similarity.¹⁰ Yet, perhaps this perception of similarity, which characterizes the 'modernity school' in Soviet studies, is owing to the overly restrictive understanding of biopolitics. If one begins by reducing the object of biopolitics to physical or biological life and its domains to medicine and social welfare, then one may safely expect to be able to point to the similarities between the Soviet Union and its ideological antagonists: after all, there are only so many ways to clean one's teeth or treat venereal disease, even for a Bolshevik. Nor can these similarities be traced to the idea of modernity: there is nothing specifically 'modern' about the governance of health, reproductive behaviour, physiological processes or bodily demeanor, which dates back to ancient history and about which we have ample evidence from the political thought of the Antiquity.¹¹ The specificity of biopolitics cannot simply be defined by its object (the biological aspect of human existence) or domain (the medico-social field of intervention). Not every governmental regulation of infectious diseases, sexual deviance, hygienic practices or modes of appearances of its

subjects is biopolitical; otherwise, the concept of biopolitics would be so general as to be coextensive with human history as such.

At the same time, the restriction of biopolitics to medico-social and other forms of population management prematurely narrows down the field of inquiry and obscures the *generality* of Foucault's original diagnosis about 'power over life' in *History of Sexuality* and the *Birth of Biopolitics*.¹² As Steven Collier has argued, there remains some confusion about 'what is designated as *bios* in biopolitics'.¹³ Foucault's genealogy of liberalism famously highlighted the emergence of the population (or, more generally, society) as a quasi-natural reality that possesses its own rationality opaque to governmental practices and hence requires a reorientation of government away from the ordering practices prescribed by 'police science' doctrines.¹⁴ The *bio-* in biopolitics refers precisely to this quasi-natural domain of 'lived social reality' and, crucially, refers to this reality *in its entirety*, without singling out anything like a specifically 'biological' aspect.¹⁵

In this logic, the *object* of biopolitics must be expanded beyond the strictly biological understanding of life towards the entirety of human existence and its *domain* extended beyond the medico-social field of intervention, embracing the wider socio-economic terrain. What defines the specificity of biopolitics is the specific *manner*, in which power engages with life in its various senses and in various domains. Thus, what changes in late 18th century Europe according to Foucault is neither the object nor domain of power but the mode of *problematization*, the transformation of its underlying ethos, episteme and techne, in which life assumes a specific status in the rationalities of government.¹⁶ What we shall attempt in our inquiry into Stalinist biopolitics is thus neither the application of a ready-made theory of biopolitics (of Foucault, Agamben or Negri) to the empirical reality of Stalinism, nor the

empirical study of predefined biopolitical techniques in the Soviet context but rather the reconstitution of the Stalinist problematization of life as an object of power.

We shall begin by comparing the governmental rationality of Stalinism with the better known biopolitical constellations of liberalism and Nazism and arguing that the specificity of Stalinism consists in the combination of governmental *immanentism* characteristic of all biopolitics with the quasi-messianic idea of revolutionary *transcendence* that seeks to abolish old forms of life and create new ones. It is this combination, which is rare and exceptional in both liberalism and Nazism, that simultaneously makes Stalinist biopolitics most resonant with Foucault's idea of biopolitics as productive intervention into forms of life and leads to its inversion into the thanatopolitical negation of those very lives that were to be transformed. We shall demonstrate this inversion in the historical analysis of the Stalinist 'second revolution', known as the Great Break (1928-1932), arguing that the combination of immanence and transcendence in Soviet biopolitics necessarily produces more violent and destructive outcomes than the 'katechontic', security-oriented biopolitics of liberalism. Finally, in the conclusion we return to the comparison of Stalinist and liberal biopolitical rationalities, posing the question of what we might learn from Stalinism that would remain timely in the contemporary hegemony of liberal biopolitics.

Socialism as a Lived Reality

The political project of Stalinism consists in the construction of socialism as a positive order. Stalinism may be distinguished from the earlier periods in the history of Bolshevism precisely by its emphasis on the productivity of power in social reality. While the early

Leninist period was marked by the successful deployment of communist ideology for the overthrow of the Provisional Government and the mobilization of the workers and peasants for the defence of the new regime during the Civil War, the shift to the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the aftermath of the Civil War entailed that the transition towards communism entered what appeared to be a historical pause. Whereas the War Communism of 1918-1920 was the first and unsuccessful attempt at the introduction of some elements of communism in the conditions of the civil war, the NEP marked a retreat from communist transformation as such, leaving Russia and subsequently the USSR in the curious position of a capitalist state ruled dictatorially by a communist party.

This is not to say that no attempts to construct new, socialist forms of life were undertaken during the 1920s. On the contrary, this period was marked by a flurry of societal experimentation with new forms of life, from avant-garde art that sought to go beyond the representation of the world towards its actual transformation to worker and student communes that sought to embody the ideals of the revolution in concrete forms of common dwelling.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the sheer pluralism of these practices, which frequently contradicted or excluded one another, ensured that *none* of them was able to attain a hegemonic status and reorder the Soviet society as a whole in the image of its ideal. Moreover, given that most of these experiments focused on cultural transformation, they were not applied to the lives of the Soviet subjects immediately and directly but rather functioned as forms of mediation that ventured to transform lives by transforming their environment, the material and social conditions of its existence. Perhaps, the best summation of the logic of utopian experimentation in the 1920s is offered by Lenin's proverbial injunction 'Learn, learn, learn!' It is precisely by learning to live differently in

different contexts, from communes to carnivals, learning new routines of time management at work or anticipating the communist future by reading utopian science fiction that Soviet subjects were expected to transform their very existence, shedding the degraded and corrupt forms of capitalist subjectivity and becoming 'new Soviet persons'.

The Stalinist period, whose beginning is conventionally dated to the defeat of the Right Opposition and the formal adoption of the First Five-Year Plan in 1929, breaks with the experimental politics of the 1920s in a number of ways. Firstly, as Richard Stites has demonstrated, starting from the late 1920s the diverse and relatively autonomous social groups engaged in utopian experimentation became increasingly subordinated to the Soviet government and sometimes violently disbanded and prosecuted.¹⁸ Secondly, the pathos of utopian transformation characteristic of the 1920s gradually gave way to exhausted cynicism and opportunism, the resurgence of anti-egalitarianism and authoritarianism, which led to the weakening of both negative ('iconoclastic') experiments in arts, education, work or sexual life and to the derisive cynicism about the more positive egalitarian experiments, from communes to the development of proletarian culture. At the same time, these changes did not lead to the abandonment of the task of the transition to socialism but in many ways conditioned its intensification:

Stalinism was not simply a negation of utopianism. It was a rejection of 'revolutionary' utopianism in favour of a single utopian vision and plan, drawn up at the pinnacle of power and imposed on an entire society without allowance for autonomous life experiments.¹⁹

Thus, the difference between Stalinism and the 'revolutionary utopianism' of the 1920s must be formulated in a more nuanced fashion and it is precisely here that the idea of

biopolitics becomes useful. What makes Stalinism biopolitical is its central question of the construction of socialism as a lived reality: how is it possible to transform an underdeveloped capitalist country governed by a socialist party into a properly socialist society? How is socialism possible at all in the domain of real being as opposed to utopian speculation? How does one proceed from reading socialism to actually living it? The specificity of Stalinism is then graspable in terms of the overcoming of the 'ideological' rationality of social change through learning and indoctrination by the properly biopolitical rationality that applies itself to the lives of its subjects directly and immediately. In this manner, a myriad of experimental attempts at transcendence of the 'old world' through learning new forms of life gives way to the full forcing of *one* of these forms of life into the immanence of lived reality.

It is well-known that Stalinism was characterized by very few innovations on the level of ideology, having freely borrowed various elements from both the 'leftist' and the 'rightist' oppositions of the 1920s.²⁰ Moreover, those innovations that could be partially attributed to it, most notably the idea of 'socialism in one country', certainly did not have mass terror as their necessary outcome: on the contrary, in the post-revolutionary context they were perceived as moderate and normalizing, a sign of a 'new maturity', in the infamously misguided words of Boris Pasternak.²¹ The true innovation and the true monstrosity of Stalinism do not lie in the ideological dimension but rather pertain to the biopolitical redeployment of the revolutionary idea of communism as the transcendence of the existent order of things in the immanentist terms of a positive order of socialism that is to be constructed, 'construction' becoming the privileged trope of the official discourse from the early 1930s onwards.

In October 1917 the working class defeated capitalism politically, having established its political dictatorship. Now the main task consists in the unfolding throughout the country of the construction of a new, socialist economy and thus finish capitalism off also economically. The socialist industrialization of the country – this is the main point from which must begin the unfolding of the construction of the socialist economy.²²

Contrary to both its apologists and its detractors, Stalinism was neither a perversion of the utopian idea of communism by a caricaturized evil figure nor the realization of the hitherto hidden violent core of this idea. It was rather an effect of the re-deployment of the idea of revolution, *ipso facto* characterized by negativity and transcendence, in the biopolitical context, characterized by positive productivity in the immanent social order. The ideal of a socialist society was explicitly posited as transcendent in relation to the underdeveloped, semi-capitalist, largely agrarian society that the USSR was on the eve of Stalin's Great Break. It is precisely the attempt to force this transcendence within the immanent reality of the Soviet society that makes it possible to speak of the period of early Stalinism (1928-1932) as the Second Revolution.²³ While the revolution of 1917 was *political*, establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of the Bolshevik party-state, the Second Revolution was manifestly *bio-political*, translating the political changes into positive transformations in all forms of life: 'The whole cultural system, comprising the organization of the state, the ways of running the economy, the social structure, justice, the penal system, education, the visual and dramatic arts, literature and the daily life of the people, was in the throes of rapid change.'²⁴ Forcing revolutionary transcendence within the immanence of the social body and thus making socialism no longer something learned but

something lived – this is the biopolitical formula of Stalinism that, as we shall see, accounts for its paradoxical and paroxysmal nature.

Securing and Transcending Nature: Liberalism, Nazism and Stalinism

It is immediately clear that this Stalinist problematization is entirely at odds with liberal biopolitics. In Foucault's well-known argument, the radical innovation of liberal governmentality is its ontological assumption about social reality as characterized by an immanent logic that is both *anterior* and *exterior* to political authority.²⁵ In contrast to the preceding governmentalities of *raison d'état* and police science that approached social reality as transparent and intelligible and hence subject to thoroughgoing governmental regulation that is in principle unlimited,²⁶ liberalism emerged as a critique of interventionism, which problematized the assumption of the transparency of socioeconomic processes. In the episteme of classical liberalism, these processes are instead posited as quasi-natural, self-regulating and hence not directly accessible to knowledge by authority.²⁷ From this agnosticism follows the central tenet of liberal government: the suspicion that 'one always governs too much'.²⁸ This suspicion brings in both the problematization of existing governmental operations as excessively restrictive and regulatory and the imperative of involving society itself in the practices of its government. The opaqueness of the liberal field of visibility does not prevent active governmental interventions in the domain of the social but rather reorients these activities from a self-consciously ordering to a *securitarian* mode. 'Liberalism fosters the social by conceiving of the government of the state as securing the processes that constitute a society separate from the state.'²⁹ The task of government is thus no longer to order the realm of transparent representations but

securing what it conceives of as a *sui generis* reality, ontologically and ethically prior to the state.

Evidently, the revolutionary politics of Bolshevism is radically heterogeneous to this naturalist-securitarian mode of biopolitical problematization. Insofar as it is animated by the quest for the revolutionary transcendence of the existing order of things, socialism is opposed both to police science, whose aspirations for total *regulation* never entailed the drive for total *transformation*, and to classical liberalism, which sought to adapt techniques of regulation to the immanent quasi-natural logic of socioeconomic processes. To the extent the Bolshevik ideology construed some aspects of the existing Russian reality as 'natural', this was not the harmonious and self-regulating nature, whose immanent processes the government must secure, but rather the corrupted and debased nature that groans for the redemption from itself that the quasi-messianic revolutionary movement promises to attain.³⁰ In the words of Maxim Gorky, the founding father of socialist realism, 'nature is acting as our enemy and we must unanimously wage war against it as an enemy'.

In the Union of Soviets, a struggle is taking place of the rationally organized will of the labouring masses against the arbitrary forces of nature and against the 'arbitrariness' in man, which in its essence is nothing more than the instinctive anarchism of personality, fed by centuries of pressure on it from a class-oriented state.³¹

It is this idea of the *transcendence of nature* that is central to the socialist project and differentiates it not only from liberalism but also from Nazism, providing us with yet another refutation of the subsumption of the two regimes under the category of totalitarianism. 'Soviet power demonstrated permanently and on different levels of its political and

economic practice a deep, almost instinctive aversion toward everything natural. The campaigns against genetics and psychoanalysis are as characteristic in this respect as the collectivization of agriculture in the 1930s, aimed at uprooting the peasants and severing their traditional, intimate attachment to the earth.³² While Nazism may be defined as a *biocratic* project which sought to subject life to power by subjecting power to the biological normativity inherent in life itself, the Bolshevik revolutionary project was originally *ideocratic*, promising to subject and conquer nature, including human nature, by the power of ideas. This emphasis on transcendence explains the connection between Bolshevism and messianism, which testifies not to the perversion of the scientific spirit of Marxism by archaic Russian superstition but to the fidelity of the Russian revolution to the spirit of Marxism itself, whose messianic promise has only been fully illuminated in the political philosophy of the late 20th century.³³

This ideocratic orientation of Bolshevism underwent an important transformation in the aftermath of the Civil War. As the messianic anticipation of world revolution dwindled after the end of World War I, the question arose of how a solitary revolutionary state may sustain itself in the hostile environment. Should the USSR pause and adapt to the capitalist world system (the NEP project) or continue on its path towards communism separately from the rest of the world (the solution eventually adopted by Stalin)? In the latter approach socialism was no longer tied to the messianic idea of global transformation, of which the October Revolution in Russia would only be the triggering event, but rather began to define the positivity of the new Soviet state. For this state to maintain itself in the capitalist environment socialism had to cease to be a rallying cry for a messianic revolution and become a really existing form of order.³⁴ This constellation permits us to understand the full

implications of the much-maligned concept of 'real socialism', which refers precisely to the form of social order instituted in the USSR under Stalin and by Stalinist regimes in the post-World War II Eastern Europe. Insofar as by the late 1920s 'socialism in one country' became not merely a debatable doctrinal point but an empirical fact, it could only be sustained by converting the passion for the messianic transcendence of all natural orders into the real existence of an immanent positive order as 'second nature'.

As a result of this conversion in the mid-1920s the messianic understanding of socialism gives way to what we may call the *katechontic* logic. The concept of the katechon that first appears in St Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians refers to the restraining or delaying force that prevents *both* the coming of the Antichrist and the advent of *parousia* that is to follow it.³⁵ The katechon does not lead a society towards redemption, but rather defers *both* redemption and catastrophe by instituting the reign of the 'lesser evil'.³⁶ The doctrine of socialism in one country exemplified this katechontic logic by promising to sustain the new socialist state in the hostile capitalist environment but only at the price of deferring and indeed restraining the *parousia* of world revolution.

While this katechontic principle arguably characterizes all structures of constituted authority from the Roman Empire onwards,³⁷ in the case of the Stalinist USSR it was characterized by a nuance that, as we shall demonstrate below, eventually undermined its operation. The Soviet regime did not simply face the problem of *maintaining* order in adverse circumstances but rather the problem of the *institution* of new order as a positive, lived reality – a 'real socialism' as a form of life, as opposed to the messianic goal of rendering inoperative all positive forms of life. The revolutionary ideal of the transcendence of nature is to be forced within the immanence of the natural order of things so that socialism would

be endowed with a real existence. The messianic ideocracy thus becomes a *bio-cracy* but not, as in the Nazi case, by making the immanence of life in the biological sense the supreme idea of the regime but rather by insisting on the need to translate the supreme idea of socialism into the immanence of life. By making socialism biopolitical the katechon also makes it real.

Yet, this is where things become complicated. The forcing of revolutionary transcendence within the objective immanence of social reality can only take the form of the *negation* of the very reality that must be reconstructed as socialist. As long as transcendence is thought in cultural terms of learning and indoctrination, it maintains a distance from the lives that are to be transformed in it and which are retained as immanent supports for the emergence of new political subjects. If this distance is abolished in the biopolitical conversion of the messianic ideocracy, the life that is to be made socialist and the life, whose current natural order is to be transcended, coincide without remainder. The ultimate paradox of socialist biopolitics is that the combination of the immanentism inherent in any biopolitical project and the orientation towards transcendence that defines the communist revolution necessarily leads to the immanent negation of the very reality that is to be made socialist.

Immunization and Biopolitical Violence

We are now in the position to address the question of the violent character of Soviet biopolitics through a systematic comparison of the Stalinist case with liberal and Nazi modes of biopolitics. While Stalinist state violence is certainly extreme in comparison with any known case of liberal biopolitics, we ought not to forget that critical studies in the

Foucauldian tradition have long emphasized the link between biopolitics and violence in liberal contexts. Despite the naturalist episteme at the heart of liberal biopolitics, liberal policies of *laissez-faire* were never merely a passive abandonment of an aboriginal reality to its own devices, but rather featured elaborate interventionist measures that sought to secure 'natural liberty' by taking necessary measures to correct its perversions. This 'corrective' aspect points to what Mitchell Dean and Barry Hindess have respectively termed the 'illiberality of liberalism' and the 'liberal government of unfreedom'.³⁸ According to these authors, liberal government historically identified within the 'natural' realm of the social manifold categories of the population, whose properties or acts were 'contrary to nature' and had to be rectified through governmental intervention, from the confinement of madmen to the correction of juvenile delinquents.³⁹

The orientation of liberal biopolitics towards security permits us to understand these corrective interventions in terms of Esposito's notion of immunity, which generalizes the above-discussed concept of the *katechon*.⁴⁰ The logic of immunization seeks to protect the political community from its constituent negativity by mobilizing this very negativity as an instrument of defense: 'Just as in the medical practice of vaccinating the individual body, so the immunization of the political body functions similarly, introducing within it a fragment of the same pathogen from which it wants to protect itself, by blocking and contradicting natural development.'⁴¹ In a similar manner, liberalism violates its own limits so as to secure the operation of the system of natural liberty against the threat that this liberty poses to itself. Insofar as natural liberty must logically presuppose the liberty of being contrary to nature and is thus a permanent danger to itself, liberal government must protect society from the threat of 'denaturation' that is inherent in it by practicing a measure of this very

denaturation itself in the governmental intervention of the kind that it generally frowns upon.⁴²

The critique of liberal government that exposes its perpetual transgression of its own limits in these projects of immunitary re-naturalization of the social realm attunes us to the implausibility of any simplistic contrast between liberalism and totalitarianism as between 'limited' and 'unlimited' government. Nonetheless, it would be equally implausible to efface all differences between e.g. liberal and Stalinist biopolitics on the grounds that liberalism does not respect its own limits. It would be more fruitful to focus on the specific role that this limit of 'natural liberty', however frequently violated, plays in liberal biopolitics. In the simplest of terms, the reality that liberal biopolitics takes as its object must *remain what it is*. The violent interventions of liberal biopolitics must thus be limited to the cases when the object of biopolitical rule does not (appear to) follow its own natural law. Of course, we should not complacently conclude from this that violent interventionism somehow becomes exceptional or peripheral to liberalism: since the naturalness of the liberal order is *itself* an artifice, in principle anything can be found to violate it (from masturbating children to hysterical mothers, from welfare recipients to profligate governments). *Anything* but not *everything* - as long as there is at least *something* in the existing reality that government may graft itself onto as its foundation, the limit to the biopolitical negation of the given forms of life remains there.

Let us now briefly consider the question of negation in Nazi biopolitics, which at least matched its 'totalitarian' twin in the scope and intensity of lethal violence. Without abandoning the naturalist ontology of life characteristic of liberalism, Nazism defines these naturalist presuppositions in racial terms. While classical liberalism claimed to protect the

natural reality of economic exchange from corruption by governmental interference, Nazism claimed to protect the natural reality of the Aryan race from contamination by heterogeneous and alien elements in the German society. Yet, precisely because the very naturality of this figure of race is as fictitious and artificial as liberal liberty, the elements it needs protection from multiply infinitely and ultimately threaten to engulf the German society as a whole. The violent paroxysms of Nazi biopolitics thus exemplify the most extreme form of Esposito's paradox of immunity, whereby the desire to protect society from the negativity internal to it leads to the introjection of secondary negativity to such an extent that it ultimately threatens the society's survival.

Immunity negates the power of negation, at least what it considers as such. Yet it is precisely because of this that immunity continues to speak the language of the negative, which it would like to annul: in order to avoid a potential evil it produces the real one; it substitutes an excess with a defect, a fullness with an emptiness, a plus with a minus, negating what it affirms and in so doing affirming nothing other than its negation.⁴³

The extremity of the Nazi genocide is not a perversion of the idea of immunization, but rather its logical conclusion, whereby the immunitary logic folds back on itself in an auto-immune manner: '[Nazism] strengthened its own immunitary apparatus to the point of remaining victim to it. The only way for an individual or collective organism to save itself definitely from the risk of death is to die.'⁴⁴ The key difference of Nazism from liberal forms of biopolitics consists in its construction of human nature in strictly biological terms, which renders the immunitary project no longer metaphorical but horrendously literal. Yet, this shift from the metaphorical to the literal and from mediation to the immediate still takes

place within the coordinates of the more general katechontic logic of immunization that Nazism shares with liberalism.

Thus, both liberalism and Nazism deployed violent and ultimately thanatopolitical practices as 'secondary' immunizing means of combating the negativity internal to and inherent in the social body, supplementing the ostensibly primary task of the positive augmentation of the vital capacities of respectively the economy and the race in accordance with their immanent natural laws. Only to the extent that these laws were held to be broken or endangered did the biopolitical rationality authorize governmental interventions into this positive domain. In liberalism this authorization historically tended to take place as a matter of an exception on specific occasions with regard to specific objects, even though the experience of colonial government exemplifies the way the exception so easily turns into a rule.⁴⁵ On the contrary, for Nazism this disposition became the norm from the outset, authorizing manifold governmental interventions not only against select categories of the population deemed biologically other and dangerous but also multifarious interventions into the living substance of the privileged race itself.⁴⁶ Yet, even in the latter case, the fundamental logic of biopolitical reason remains immunitary and immanentist. In contrast, the thanatopolitical conversion of Stalinist biopolitics may not be explained by the radicalization of the paradox of immunity, since it is precisely the immunitary function that is renounced in the idea of the forcing of transcendence into immanence. In the following section we shall consider an empirical example of this renunciation.

The Great Break: The Forcing of the Socialist Ideal

In contrast to the logic of immunization in both its moderate and extreme forms, the biopolitical rationality of Stalinism did not seek to promote, optimize, augment or even correct *what is* (however fictitious and artificial this given object ultimately turns out to be) but rather to *make be* (to create as positive reality that which is for now present in the transcendent form of the revolutionary ideal). In the Stalinist biopolitical problematization the immanent reality of social life that liberalism and Nazism valorized as natural in their own distinct ways is devalued in its positive content by the very ideal which is to replace it. If the existing reality of private property, individualism, religion, etc. is from the outset construed as obsolete and dying, then it can never pose a positive limit but only a purely negative obstacle to socialist transformation. The only thing that socialism promises this dying reality is the actualization of its death. It is thus no coincidence that its most sustained project bore the name of the Great Break (*veliky perelom*). The period of the Great Break (1928-1932) is usually addressed in terms of three radical transformations: collectivization, industrialization and the Cultural Revolution. In these three projects the denigrated immanence of social reality of semi-capitalist agriculture, underdeveloped industry and the uncultured population were to be replaced by new forms of life: socialized (or nationalized) agriculture, rapid development of heavy industry, the development of proletarian culture and the rise of socialist intelligentsia.

The forced industrialization, implemented during the first two five-year plans, led to significant increases in coal and iron ore production, as well as the establishment, frequently from scratch, of major new industrial complexes, e.g. Magnitogorsk and Kuznetsk, as well as new machinery, tractor and automobile plants. The rapid industrial development,

particularly in heavy industry, came at the price of extreme social dislocations and led to the marked decrease in workers' living and working standards.⁴⁷ The workers' real incomes fell during the early 1930s and their working conditions became poorer and more hazardous, particularly in newly constructed complexes, where housing and hygienic conditions were at best rudimentary. The workers were also subjected to much more stringent production norms and harsher disciplinary measures, starting with the 1932 amendments to the Labour Code that made it possible to fire workers for one day's absence, intensifying with the 1938 introduction of compulsory 'labour books' and culminating with the 1940 legislation introducing criminal penalties for quitting a job or being late for work.⁴⁸ During the terror of 1936-1938, even minor violations of work discipline would lead to the accusation of 'wrecking', immediately associated with political opposition and espionage and leading to long camp terms or even execution.⁴⁹ The camp system itself played not merely a punitive but also an active productive role in the industrialization process, since major development projects, most notably the White Sea-Baltic Sea and Moscow-Volga Canals, the Baikal-Amur railway, etc., relied on the use of the forced labour of camp inmates.⁵⁰

The Cultural Revolution was a multifarious process of the overcoming of the pre-revolutionary 'cultural backwardness' through the development of universal school education and health care, literacy campaigns for adults, higher education for workers and the formation of the proletarian intelligentsia to replace the distrusted yet necessary 'bourgeois specialists'.⁵¹ The cultural campaigns of this period sought to revive the militant spirit of the October revolution and the Civil War and targeted all forms of non-revolutionary culture, both traditional and bourgeois; attempting their eradication in favour of variably understood proletarian culture. Campaigns led by the Komsomol and rank-and-

file party activists united in professional and artistic associations of the militant left targeted 'alien class influences, bourgeois degeneration, petty-bourgeois wavering and blunting of revolutionary vigilance in the face of the more cultured class enemy'.⁵² In contrast to the utopian experimentation of the 1920s that had similar goals, the Revolution of 1928-1932 took the explicitly antagonistic form of 'class war on the cultural front', combining violent militant actions from below with party leadership from above.⁵³ The 'warlike' character of the Cultural Revolution took the form of criminal prosecution of professional and academic elites (the Shakhty Trial of 1928, the Industrial Party Trial of 1930, the Academics' Trial of 1931), the expulsion of students of non-proletarian backgrounds from schools and universities, censorship and witch-hunts in sciences and arts, etc. The biopolitical orientation of this process is evident from the following claim: 'we have to drive out all trace of liberal culture-mongering from cultural work and conduct it as proletarian struggle for the real creation of a new culture.'⁵⁴ 'New culture' could only attain the status of a 'real creation', if old culture, be it traditional peasant ways of life, the decadent 'jazz age' lifestyle of the NEP-men, the bohemian modernism of the urban intelligentsia or the technicist apoliticism of the specialists, could be de-created, sometimes in a painfully literal way.

Of course, the greatest 'break' was achieved in the process of collectivization, which sought to and largely succeeded in radically transforming the form of life of over 80% of the population, from *de facto* private farming to forced employment in socialized or nationalized farms. While private farming was routinely denounced by the Bolsheviks on ideological grounds since before the Revolution, collectivization remained on the level of utopian experimentation, less than 1% of farm land having been collectivized in any way by 1928. In contrast, after *one* year of the Stalinist all-out drive for collectivization, the figure

rose to over 60%, exceeding even the official designs of the Five-Year Plan.⁵⁵ The mobilization of the peasant population for forced labour in state-organized and state-controlled structures not only swept away century-old communal traditions and ways of life in pre-revolutionary peasant Russia, but subjected millions of peasants to persecution, arrest, camp confinement, forced resettlement and separation of families. Violently crushing numerous attempts at resistance, the regime engaged in what amounted to the second Civil War, which was not over after the completion of the collectivization in 1932 but flared up again in the form of top-down state terror of 1937, when the infamous 'mass operations' targeted former kulaks and village priests as well as their family members. The most horrendous aspect of this civil war was the famine of 1932-1933 in the Ukraine, North Caucasus, Kazakhstan and other areas of the USSR, which claimed the lives of at least five million people and is presently interpreted either as a consequence of the disastrous economic policies of collectivization or as an intentional act of genocide on the part of the regime.⁵⁶

However different in scope and effects, these three aspects of the 'second revolution' demonstrate the biopolitical character of the Great Break as the project of converting the transcendent ideals of the communist ideology into the lived reality of a socialist society as the first stage in the construction of communism. The empirical record of violence involved in this project illustrates the logic at heart in the very project of the biopolitical *production* of social immanence as opposed to the biopolitical *regulation* of anterior reality. For the new socialist reality to emerge, the old society must cease to exist, sometimes only in terms of status (university professors reduced to unemployment and poverty) and sometimes in the brutally physical sense (millions of victims of repression, resettlement and starvation).

Socialist biopolitics is from the outset characterized by the presupposition of the violent forcing of something new into a domain radically heterogeneous to it and the forcing *out* of all that conflicts with the newly produced reality. Contrary to both liberal and Nazi biopolitics that, at least in principle, sought to capture and govern life according to its *own* immanent rationality, Soviet biopolitics was *hostile* to the very life it sought to govern.

Anti-Immunity: From Katechon to Accelerator

This hostility of Soviet biopolitics to the given reality produces an uncanny reversal of the immunitary logic that, according to Esposito, holds true for both liberalism and Nazism. These two immanentist varieties of biopolitics sought to *protect* life from its immanent ‘natural’ negativity by the injection of secondary, ‘artificial’ negativity that is supposed to save life from itself. This secondary negativity might at times slip out of control and endanger the survival of life itself, yet these paroxysms would be an indication of biopolitics going *wrong*. The massive violence of liberal regimes in colonial territories could be grasped as the betrayal of liberalism from *within* the liberal episteme, while Hitler’s 1945 Demolition Order that resigned the German population itself to death through the destruction of vital infrastructure was clearly a symptom of the ultimate *failure* of Nazism. While these paroxysms of immunitary biopolitics are indeed inherent in it as potentialities for thanatopolitical conversion, they are only accessible within these problematizations *as* paroxysmal, excessive and perverse. The naturalist presuppositions of the immunitary logic serve both to authorize corrective interventions and to condemn them when things get out of hand.

In the case of Stalinism, biopolitical violence follows an entirely different logic. Insofar as Stalinism abrogated the naturalist presuppositions defining both liberalism and Nazism, the negativity of revolutionary transcendence is introjected into the immanence of social life not as a means of its *protection* but directly as a means of its overcoming, negation, and ultimately destruction. Thus, the violence that seems counterintuitive in immunitary biopolitics is not at all paradoxical in the Soviet case. After all, the Internationale promised that the revolution would 'wipe the slate clean' so that the 'world would change its foundation' and 'whoever was nothing would become everything'. There is then nothing surprising about the hostility of the radical revolutionary project to life *as it is*, to the immanence of given forms of life that have attained a quasi-natural status or to 'mere life' understood as the confinement of humanity in its nature. Moreover, the model for this 'change of foundation' had already been established by the political revolution of 1917, in which 'nothing' became 'everything' (and conversely) in symbolic terms of positive and negative discrimination, abolition of ranks and titles, lustration, etc. Yet, as soon as we go beyond the mere juridico-political reversal and venture to produce socialism as a positive form of life, the logic of the Internationale gets rather more ominous. How can we change the foundation of the world in lived reality? What is the 'clean slate' if it is no longer a metaphor? Translated into biopolitical terms, the hostility to the existing world means that for nothing to become everything, something in the world would have to become *nothing*, i.e. cease to exist.

As we have argued above, immunitary biopolitics seeks to protect the immanence of life from the dangers inherent in it and mobilizes some of these dangers as pathogens to be administered for the purposes of protection: '[immunity] reproduces in a controlled form

exactly what it is meant to protect us from.’⁵⁷ Thus, the negativity that this mode of biopolitics finds in the immanence of life is never completely effaced but on the contrary becomes part of the apparatus of protection: ‘the negative not only survives its cure, it constitutes the condition of effectiveness. It is as if it were doubled into two halves, one of which is required for the containment of the other: the lesser of two evils is intended to block the greater evil, but in the same language.’ (ibid.) This is why immunitary biopolitics is constitutively *anti-utopian*: insofar as protection may only be negative and the negativity that demands protection from is ineradicable, all that can be attained is always the *lesser evil* but never the Good as such.⁵⁸

Thus, in full accordance with the katechontic principle immunitary biopolitics fights evil with evil and in this manner infinitely defers the appearance of the Good. In contrast, what is at stake in socialist biopolitics is not the *protection* of reality with all its constituent negativity but rather its *transformation* that forces this negativity out and the revolutionary ideal in. The transcendent idea of communist revolution is precisely the idea of the Good that is to be actualized within the domain of immanence through the negation of the forms of life that presently characterize it. Insofar as it is not valorized as a ‘system of natural liberty’ or a *Volksgemeinschaft*, but rather devalued in terms of the communist doctrine, anterior social reality is not worthy of protection, *even negatively*. While it certainly promises a ‘new life’, socialist biopolitics does not promise it *to* the ‘old life’ and its representatives, who are instead wholly *exposed* to the force of transcendence that takes the empirical form of existential negation. With immunitary protection withdrawn from the existing forms of life, they end up subject to all possible forms of negative intervention: confiscation of property,

forced resettlement, camp confinement, organized starvation and, ultimately, 'liquidation' either 'as a class' (1928-32) or as 'enemies of the people' (1936-1938).

As the immunitary logic is reversed in favour of the full-blown forcing of transcendence of the Good into the immanence of life, the katechontic principle also ends up inverted in favour of its apparent opposite, namely eschatological *apocalypticism* that awaits and welcomes the Antichrist as the sign of the imminent parousia.⁵⁹ Carl Schmitt termed this apocalyptic figure the 'accelerator' (*Beschleuniger*).⁶⁰ The accelerator throws katechontic caution to the winds, yet not in order to destroy the constituted order in the hope for the Messianic Kingdom but rather to fortify this order by directly and immediately introjecting it with the good that the messianic idea may only promise and tease us with. This introjection cannot but take the form of the negative: 'that which is not' attains being in the world by rendering inexistent that which is. Moreover, because the introjected negative is not even perceived as negative but rather as the Good, there is no need to limit its dosage, hence the autocritical disposition of avoiding 'governing too much', so characteristic of liberalism, does not even arise in the case of Stalinism, which explicitly renounced all formal limits to the exercise of power. Instead, the entire apparatus of government is reoriented from the 'conservative' task of securing, stabilizing and restraining towards the acceleration, catalyzation and forcing of its transcendent ideals into social immanence.

In the studies of the Russian Revolution, the theme of apocalypticism usually arises in the context of the pre- and immediately post-revolutionary politics of the Bolshevik Party,⁶¹ committed to revolution on the world scale and viewing Russia as the springboard for the wider revolutionary process, which, as every springboard, could well be sacrificed so that the world revolution could succeed. In contrast, the Stalinist doctrine of socialism in one

country allegedly marked the abandonment of these eschatological illusions in favour of a more realistic and pragmatic course of fortifying the socialist system within the USSR in a katechontic fashion. Nonetheless, this interpretation, which has become ever more influential in the Putin period, when Stalin is increasingly recast as a non- or meta-ideological 'authoritarian modernizer',⁶² completely ignores the Great Break of 1928-1932 and its horrendous social dislocations, which simply cannot be explained in terms of realistic and pragmatic policy designs. While the debates about the socioeconomic consequences of collectivization and industrialization show no signs of abating,⁶³ it is clear that the shift from NEP to the Great Break was not primarily motivated by economic calculations but rather by political considerations, which continued to drive this 'second revolution' forward despite massive social resistance and human cost. The merely katechontic tasks of securing and stabilizing the Soviet state evidently did not call for the civil war against the peasantry, which itself created a genuine security threat in 1930-1932 and caused enormous instability in rural areas, or the shock industrialization, which was disorganized and wasteful to an extreme degree.⁶⁴ The Great Break simply makes no sense from the perspective on Stalinism as a conservative-katechontic project that abandons the early Bolshevik apocalypticism that is usually associated with Stalin's arch-enemy Trotsky. Instead, it can only be grasped as the *intensification* of this very apocalypticism through the actual forcing of revolutionary transcendence into social immanence, notwithstanding its economic and human costs, which were written off along with the old forms of life that were doomed to disappearance in the socialist world.

While the paradox of immunization consists in the fact that every attempt to protect social reality against itself must make use of the very thing that endangers it, the paradox of

Stalinist biopolitics consists in the fact that its complete realization would coincide with the complete annihilation of the lived reality to which it applies itself. If the Great Break were to succeed fully, the Soviet society would be completely *broken*. As long as the domain of life that is the object of biopolitical government is not perceived as natural, *sui generis* and endowed with its own rationality, but rather a priori devalued as the degraded, obsolete and already 'dying' remnant of the past to be transcended by a new vision of the Good that has no correlate in this reality, the production of the new is only conceivable as the negation that transforms the dying into the dead and only in this manner clears the space for the new life. In the words of Stalin's close ally Lazar Kaganovich, the Great Break consists in the 'radical destruction of all socio-economic relations, accompanied by a technical revolution, and not the other way round.'⁶⁵

From this perspective, the paradigm of the Soviet biopolitical space was indeed the Gulag camp, in which the inmates were simultaneously stripped of their positive forms of life (as peasants, professors, priests, etc.) and subjected to the forced labour for the construction of the new socialist reality, including their own identities as 'new Soviet persons'. Agamben's famous thesis about the camp as the 'biopolitical nomos of the modern' finds its confirmation at the site that is not commonly associated with Western modernity.⁶⁶ While labour and concentration camps were certainly not a Bolshevik or even a Russian invention, the camp serves as a better paradigm of specifically socialist biopolitics, insofar as it epitomizes the devaluation of given forms of life that remains peripheral in both liberal and Nazi versions of biopolitics.⁶⁷ While the camps established by the Spanish in Cuba or the British in South Africa and the Nazi concentration camps were clearly sites of the state of exception (in relation to a well-defined norm in liberal regimes or gradually eclipsing the

norm itself in the Nazi case),⁶⁸ the Soviet camp of the Great Break was, strictly speaking, the *paradigm of the norm itself* rather than an exception in any sense of the word. This is why the Gulag was never concealed by the regime until the period of the Great Purges but, on the contrary, was publicized incessantly as the key site of the 'reforging' of human beings into 'new Soviet persons'.

The *History of the Construction of the White Sea–Baltic Canal*, the infamous volume produced by a brigade of leading Soviet writers and artists headed by Gorky in 1934, could not have appeared in liberal or Nazi regimes, which might have considered their camps their 'dirty secrets', a 'necessary evil', but never as the *paradigm* of socioeconomic policy as such. Yet, thus is precisely what Gorky, Shklovsky, Rodchenko and other key figures of Soviet art and literature ventured in their glorification of camp labour in the construction of the canal.⁶⁹ The plot of the book that would serve as a foundation for the socialist realist doctrine emphasizes the transformation of class enemies, particularly kulaks and anti-Soviet saboteurs, into the heroes of socialist construction. While at the beginning of their terms the inmates are degraded as 'all the pus that the country had strained off', at the end of the construction they are presented as 'amazing builders', thoroughly rehabilitated and transformed by labour.⁷⁰ Comparing the White Sea camps with 'bourgeois prisons and camps', allegedly characterized by lawlessness and brute violence for solely punitive purposes, the authors both moralize and aesthetize the Soviet camp as the site of *reforging*, a positive, pedagogical transformation of the subject:

[The] entire social pedagogy in the camps has grown out of the dictatorship of the proletariat, out of the laws of the socialist system. All of this complex, subtle and ramified system in fact consists of a single powerful thesis: in the

camps we force people incapable of independently re-educating themselves to live the Soviet life, we push them until such time that they begin to do this voluntarily. Yes, we force them by all means to do what millions of people in our country do by goodwill, experiencing happiness and joy.⁷¹

In this manner, the biopolitical violence of the camps is effaced both by the devaluation of the anterior lives of the inmates as 'criminal' that legitimizes the use of force and the explicit linkage of the camps to the Soviet system at large, whereby whatever takes place in the camps and outside them is ultimately the same process of 'learning to live the Soviet life'. If liberal or Nazi camps are genuinely *different* from the rest of society and ending up in one of them certainly entailed a drastic change in one's way of life, then the Soviet society during the Great Break must be grasped as simply a zero-degree camp, in which the very same process of reforging unfolds with a lesser intensity, milder violence or looser control. The analogy between the camp and the society at large was fortified in the June 1934 Decree that made any unauthorized attempt to leave the territory of the Soviet Union a criminal offense that could be punished by death penalty. While certainly exceptional in its violence and inhumanity, the Soviet camp of the late 1920s and the early 1930s was also the paradigm of the social norm.

High Stalinism: The Negative Inflections of Soviet Biopolitics

Yet, great as it was, the Great Break was never total and the extreme biopolitics of the Second Revolution did not achieve a total forcing of the transcendence of the socialist idea within social immanence, which would have entailed the total disappearance of anterior

forms of life. Instead, the apocalypticism of the Second Revolution was interrupted in 1934 with the partial reassertion of the katechontic logic. From 1934 to the end of the Stalinist era the biopolitical rationality of Soviet socialism was subjected to what we may call a *negative inflection*, an immanent mode of negation that leaves the negated object partly intact yet removes its force, effectiveness or significance. While the general task of transition towards communism through the construction and development of socialism was never renounced by the Soviet regime until its demise, the modes of this transition no longer resembled the apocalyptic drive of the Great Break. Instead, the Stalinist biopolitical rationality was fractured into three forms, all of which added a further negative twist to the negation of social immanence in 1928-1932.

The first of these forms has been known as the *Great Retreat* since the 1946 classic work by Nicholas Timasheff who observed a partial reversal in the policies of the construction of socialism after 1934.⁷² This reversal took different forms in different areas: the restoration of economic incentives and disciplinary measures in the industry, the rehabilitation of 'bourgeois specialists' and the restoration of ranks and titles, the downgrading of proletarian internationalism and the cultivation of Russian patriotism in school education and popular culture, the return to a pro-family and pro-natalist policy, etc. While the term 'retreat' might be inappropriate, since these policies did not amount to an explicit abandonment of the socialist project, they nonetheless constitute a fundamental transformation of this project through a certain compromise with the given reality that tempers the sociocidal drive at the price of the divergence of Soviet socialism from its official concept, which became ever more pronounced after Stalin's death.

The second mode of negative inflection was partly intended to conceal this divergence. The doctrine of socialist realism, established in 1934 as the official canon of all Soviet art, posited the task of the artist as the 'representation of Soviet reality in its revolutionary development', i.e. in its becoming as opposed to its being. As long as the object of representation in socialist realism was the invisible essence of reality in its revolutionary becoming, this canon became thoroughly separated from reality as such, producing simulacra of socialist forms of life, including New Soviet Man, at the cost of the de-realization and aesthetization of life itself. While the Great Retreat negated the purity of the socialist ideal in favour of a certain toleration of the messiness of the real, the strategy of socialist-realist simulacra served to de-realize the messy and unwieldy 'real life' through its saturation with aesthetic representations of the socialist ideal.⁷³

The final negative inflection of socialist biopolitics is exemplified by the phenomenon of the Great Terror of 1936-1938. While, as we have seen, the Soviet regime never shunned recourse to state violence, the era of the Terror remains exceptional not merely in the scope and intensity of violence but also in its manifest lack of an instrumental objective, either ideological as in the Red Terror of the Civil War or biopolitical as in the Great Break.⁷⁴ It is notable that the Terror in its three main forms of party purges, mass operations against ex-kulaks and national operations against diasporas, began in the aftermath of the passage of the 1936 Constitution, which proclaimed the completion of the process of socialist construction, the formal abolition of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the cessation of class war.⁷⁵ Paradoxically at first glance, it was the very claim for stabilization and pacification in the USSR that made possible the extreme escalation of the Terror. Since the enemy was no longer defined by its class identity, it became cast as the 'enemy of the people' as a whole, defined not merely in political but simultaneously in criminal and moral

terms as 'fiends', 'pygmies', 'fascist lackeys', 'insects', etc.⁷⁶ Secondly, since the enemy was no longer visible, it could be found anywhere in the society. While the Great Break was characterized by an explicit antagonism between the state and the peasantry, the period of the Terror was marked by the disappearance of an identifiable agent of antagonism and the consequent dissemination of state violence throughout the society: where there once was the party and the kulaks, there now stood the people and their enemies, and one could never be sure which category one belonged to.

If the biopolitical project of the Great Break marked a forcing of the transcendence of the ideal within the real immanence of social life, the Terror negated this violent forcing, yet not by the retreat from the negating action but rather by divorcing the process of negation from the transcendent ideal, making the annihilation of immanence itself wholly immanent. Whether it is interpreted in intentional or structural terms, the Terror was a purely negative response to the negativity at the heart of the Soviet biopolitical project and rather than overturn this negativity it augmented and intensified it. In this manner, it marked the final stage in the conversion of biopolitics into thanatopolitics. Disjointed from the transcendent ideal to be forced into social immanence, governmental violence itself becomes strictly immanent and the political system is transformed into a killing machine: the violent forcing of the ideal into the real ends in the sheer destruction of reality as such.

What began as a quasi-messianic project of transcending the given forms of life in the triumph of socialism as a positive, lived reality thus ended up a combination of a retreat and compromise with these forms of life, covered up by the proliferation of simulacra of socialist forms of life and enforced by terror disseminated throughout the society. This combination defines High Stalinism as we know it and the subsequent development of Soviet socialism,

including its ultimate demise, may be grasped in terms of its eventual disarticulation. Once the terror subsided after Stalin's death and the simulacra of socialism grew worn out and ineffective during the stagnation era, all that remained of socialism by the late 1980s was the retreat from it as such.

Conclusion

Our reconstitution of the biopolitical rationality of Stalinism demonstrates that its extreme violence arises out of its aspiration for the transcendence of all things natural, which, moreover, takes place not on the level of ideas but, as it were, within nature itself, in the immanence of lived reality that must become transformed in accordance with the transcendent communist ideal. It is thus this explicit orientation towards the transcendence of nature *within* its immanence that separates Stalinism from the Western biopolitics defined by a naturalist ontology, particularly liberalism.

Yet, the lesson of Stalinism goes beyond the vindication of liberalism as a perpetually self-critical and self-limiting governmental rationality, especially since liberalism itself has not been alien to the 'biopolitics of transcendence' that seeks to produce forms of life that do not yet exist by negating the forms of life that are given. The paradoxes and paroxysms of regime change and post-war management that we observe in Afghanistan and Iraq today may be explained precisely by the impossibility to simply transfer the liberal rationalities of rule onto societies that were never structured and governed according to liberal principles and which are as distant from the liberal ideal as the Russian or Ukrainian villages in the 1920s were from the Bolshevik visions of collectivized agriculture. While ideologically

liberalism and Stalinism are strictly antithetical, the Stalinist project of the construction of socialism in a non-socialist society and the global promotion of liberal capitalism in non-liberal settings face the same problem of forcing the transcendence of their different ideals into the immanence of social orders heterogeneous to these ideals.

Moreover, the story does not end here, since, as Foucauldian studies have demonstrated in various ways, contemporary versions of liberalism increasingly abandon their naturalist presuppositions also domestically in extending the operation of economic rationality throughout the entire society. While neoliberalism maintains and even intensifies the liberal valorization of economic rationality, it no longer subscribes to the naturalist ontology that located this rationality in the immanent 'system of natural liberty' but rather posits it as an artefact of civilization, produced in governmental practices that establish quasi-market forms of life in various spheres of the society.⁷⁷ As a result of this ontological reversal, the natural liberty that once posed a limit to governmental intervention is reinscribed as an artefact of this very intervention, the privileged form of life to be produced through the negation of any already given forms.

Yet, as a result of this reinscription, neoliberalism becomes formally indistinct from the mode of problematization that we encountered in Stalinism, which, after all, also sought to govern society in the name of (a different understanding of the) economy. It therefore faces the same problem of what is to be done with the given forms of life that are heterogeneous to the neoliberal economic rationality. It also frequently resorts to the same solution of the destruction of the immanent rationalities of ordering and management in various domains and the reconstitution of the domains in question as quasi-enterprises. If neoliberalism has been considerably less violent, both physically and metaphorically, in this enterprise than

Stalinism was in during the Great Break, this is not because of its immanent limitations, which it abandoned by shedding the ontological assumption of natural liberty, but due to the existence of democratic institutions and practices, which make possible the resistance, however weak or ineffective, to the colonization of a plurality of immanent forms of life by economic rationality. Whenever these democratic institutions are weakened, dismantled or simply absent, we ought not to be surprised to see neoliberal biopolitics venture to force its ideal into the immanence of the real and, recoiling from the resulting dislocations, produce its own versions of retreat, simulacrum and terror.

NOTES

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

² See Michel Foucault, *'Society Must be Defended': Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976* (London: Picador, 2003), pp. 82-83, 275; Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 41-42; Esposito, *Bios*, p. 113.

³ See Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), pp. 53-66, 165-172.

⁴ See respectively Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Richard Pipes, *Communism: A History* (New York: Random House, 2003). For a critique see Esposito, 'Totalitarianism and Biopolitics? Concerning a Philosophical Interpretation of the Twentieth Century', *Critical Inquiry* 34 (2008), 633-644; Domenico Losurdo, 'Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism', *Historical Materialism* 12: 2 (2004), 25-55.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism: Five Interventions into the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 92-93.

⁶ Mark Edele, *Stalinist Society: 1928-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 231-242.

⁷ See David Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism: 1914-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995); Kotkin, 'Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjuncture', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2: 1 (2001), 111-164.

⁸ See Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*; Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene and the Revolutionary State* (Chicago: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

⁹ See Kotkin, 'Modern Times'; Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*; Michael David-Fox, 'Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 55: 4 (2006), 535-555.

¹⁰Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses*, pp. 306-313.

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